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ABSTRACT

This paper describes trends in the teaching of reading to young children in British infant and primary schools. Initial sections outline background features, organization, and procedures in infant education, pointing out that great variations exist among schools. A section on reading practices notes that, although basal reading schemes, which are vocabulary controlled and employ a "look-and-say" method, are used fairly extensively, more emphasis is placed on informal, incidental reading and writing than on reading schemes. The paper traces historical patterns in reading instruction: the establishment of look-and-say methods in the 1940s and 1950s; the growth of "progressive" practices which in some cases led to the abandonment of formal teaching; and the emergence of doubts about the progressive movement, based on concerns about declining reading skills. A 1975 governmental report called for a balance between progressive teaching and specific teaching of basic language arts skills; currently, public concern about standards of literacy is becoming vociferous. The paper concludes with predictions for future changes in the direction of more formal teaching, along with a statement regarding the author's hopes for changes which will be forward looking rather than a nostalgic return to older methods. (GW)

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BEGINNING READING IN ENGLAND

(Paper to be presented at the Twenty-Second Annual Convention of the International Reading Association, Miami Beach, Florida, May 1977.)

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Thursday, May 5th, 1977, 9.00-11.45 a.m.

Room 102B, Miami Beach Convention Center.

Session: Symposium - Beginning Reading Around The World.

BEGINNING READING IN ENGLAND

Vera Southgate

I BACKGROUND FEATURES OF INFANT EDUCATION

"Beginning reading" is a term rarely used by teachers in England, who tend to speak of "the early stages of reading", with specia' reference to the first two to three years of schooling. Three features of the English education system are of particular relevance as a background to the early stages of reading.

A Length of Infant Education

First, compulsory schooling for children starts at the age of 5. A tiny proportion of children aged 3-5 years attend nursery schools or classes but, as reading forms no part of their curriculum, they need not be considered here. Children aged 5-7 years are referred to as infants and so infant education is the first stage of compulsory education.

The school year is divided into three terms, commencing in September, January and April. In practice, most schools accept children at the beginning of the term in which they will reach their fifth birthday. Consequently many children are only 4 years 8 months when they begin full-time schooling.

Infants are taught in separate infant schools or in primary schools catering for children aged 5-11 years. In the former case the infants will be promoted at the age of 7 to junior schools for children aged 7-11; in the latter case they will go to "junior" classes in the same school. (In a few areas there are "First Schools" for children up to 8 or 9 years and "Middle Schools" for children 8 or 9 to 12 or 13.) Promotion from the infant to the junior stage of education takes place only once a year, in September. Promotions depend solely on chronological age and not on educational performance. All children who reach their 7th birthday during the preceding school year are promoted to junior classes every September. Thus, depending on their dates of birth, different groups of children spend 28, 32 or 36 months in infant classes. Teachers frequently deplore these variations; pointing out that, in learning to read, "summer born" children

are seriously handicapped in comparison with "autumn-born" children who spend 8 months longer as infants.

B Flexibility of Education System

The second important feature is the flexibility of the English education system. Central or local control of what takes place within the school is minimal. The organisation of classes, the content of the curriculum, the time devoted to various subjects and the ways of teaching reading vary from school to school, at the discretion of the headteacher. This flexibility complicates communication with educationists from other countries, as it is rarely possible to generalise about practices in English schools. One example will highlight this point. At a national level, the Education Act of 1944 does not even specifically lay down that children should be taught to read and write. The lack of directive in this matter, however, should not be taken to imply that infant teachers do not regard reading as important. Certainly the writer does not know of any infant school which fails to incorporate reading into its activities! On the other hand, great variations exist in different schools in the emphasis placed on reading, and the ways of teaching it.

C The Autonomy of The Head Teacher

The third feature is closely related to the second. Within their own schools, head-teachers enjoy almost complete autonomy in matters relating to the education and general welfare of their pupils. Although Her Majesty's Inspectors, representing the government, as well as local advisers and inspectors may offer advice, it would only be in exceptional circumstances that they would issue directives. Neither has it been expected, in the past, that parents should have any say in what is taught or how it should be taught.

The headteacher of a school is quite free to decide on the school's general approach to teaching reading and the selection of reading materials; money allocated to the school for books and equipment being spent solely at his discretion. In practice, such decisions usually arise from joint discussions between headteacher and staff, so that a general policy about teaching reading is agreed on. In some schools, however, headteachers encourage staff to follow their own ideas about reading, with the result that different methods and materials may be used in different classes in the same school. This freedom to use whatever means they consider appropriate for helping children to learn to read, is cherished by English infant teachers.

II ORGANISATION AND PROCEDURES IN INFANT CLASSES

The legal maximum number of infant pupils per class is 40 but, in practice, with exceptions such as crowded inner-city schools, the number is usually nearer to 30 pupils. The recent decline in the birth rate has resulted in some even smaller classes. While there are a few male infant teachers, the majority of infant teachers are female.

The school day for all infants, usually lasts from 9.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., with a break of 1½ hours for lunch and a 15 minute break in the morning and afternoon.

Infant classes always consist of both boys and girls, and the children are usually of mixed abilities. In the majority of schools the children in a class are all of the same age and the whole class moves up to a new teacher every year or more frequently. Some schools, however, now use "family" or "vertical" grouping. Then each class is made up of children with a complete range of chronological ages from under-5s to over-7s. These children probably stay with the same teacher for the whole of their infant education. There are also variations of total family grouping which include, for example, 5 and 6 year olds grouped together and 7 year olds separated.

Some infant classes have no time-table but work what is known as an "integrated day". Reading and writing activities merge into or are integrated with creative activities, science or mathematics, throughout the day, according to the prevailing interests of the pupils and/or teacher. Those schools which consider reading as a top priority clearly devote more time to it than schools which emphasise, for instance, creative activities of all kinds. Certain schools try to achieve a balance by arranging reading, writing and number activities in the mornings and creative activities in the afternoons. Such flexible patterns of planning result in different schools, or even children in the same school or class, spending varying amounts of time on reading and writing activities.

The regimes in most infant schools are now either "open" or moving in that direction. The whole atmosphere is informal, happy and busy, within colourful and exciting environments. A truly "formal" infant class would be a rarity. It would be quite unusual, for instance, to find infants sitting in rows, facing the front of the classroom. Instead, children sit in small groups and talk to each other about what they are doing. Children generally move about the room or throughout the school informally and there are many opportunities for them to engage in individual pursuits, such as playing with sand and water, painting, constructing models, serving in shops, dressing up and acting, reading or writing.

III READING IN INFANT CLASSES

Despite variations in ways of teaching beginning reading in England, it is possible, by disregarding extremes, to draw a broad picture of common practices in the majority of infant classes.

A Infant Reading Schemes

Although basic reading schemes are used fairly extensively, the schemes themselves, and ways of using them, differ from schemes and practices in the

U.S.A. and Canada. English reading schemes are much smaller, both in size of books and in the amount of supporting materials. Even so, the supporting materials, other than slim "supplementary" books, are bought only rarely. Teachers' manuals are fairly small and their tone is suggestive rather than didactic. Yet certain schools fail to purchase teachers' manuals, not all teachers read them and a very few faithfully follow the guide-lines. Teachers use the schemes in whatever ways they think best. Only a minority of schools rely solely on one reading scheme and even they tend to use parts of other schemes and additional supplementary books.

The most up-to-date information available about reading practices in infant classes is found in the Bullock Report (1)* discussed later in this paper. It reports that, in 1973, only 19% of schools containing 6 year olds used just one commercial reading scheme; 53% used books from several reading schemes, alongside other books which the teachers had graded in order of difficulty; and the remaining 28% used commercial schemes together with other books, not all of which were graded.

The reading schemes in most common use are vocabulary controlled and employ a "Look-and-Say" method. The Bullock Report, for instance, found that 79% of 6 year old classes used Key Words Reading Scheme (2) and 89% used "other vocabulary controlled types of reading scheme. These would, no doubt, include schemes published in the 1950's, e.g. Janet and John (3) The McKee Readers (4), The Happy Trio (5) and Happy Venture (6). A further 31% used Breakthrough to Literacy (7), a "language experience" scheme, published in 1970. In fact, in nearly every infant school, one could find parts of the six schemes mentioned as well as many others.

* Certain selected figures quoted represent the results of a questionnaire circulated to a sample of primary schools by the Bullock Committee. The writer, although she was a member of this committee, has serious misgivings about the phraseology used in the questionnaires, the teachers' understanding of what was intended and, consequently, the validity of some of the findings. Accordingly, only such figures as are supported by her own experience of existing practices have been included in the text.

Two recently published schemes are now finding their ways into many schools. Link Up (8) is broadly a language-experience scheme, with the sentence structure based on the patterns found in the spoken language of urban 5 and 6 year olds. While provision is made for some phonic instruction, the main emphasis is on comprehension. In contrast, the vocabulary of Language In Action (9) has been chosen to highlight a system of "spelling pattern progression". The very first books are each designed to teach the sound of a single letter. In later stories, letters are combined, by the use of a synthetic phonic method. Later books incorporate increasingly complex grammatical and syntactical patterns.

Reading schemes generally use the medium of t.o. (traditional orthography). Bullock found that only 9.1% of classes containing 6 year olds used i.t.a. (the Initial Teaching Alphabet). A further 3.6% used schemes employing some form of colour-coding in the early stages.

3 Teachers' General Practices

The formal teaching of reading and writing does not commence as soon as children start school. Neither is it usual for teachers to adopt formal programmes to develop pre-reading skills, e.g. visual and auditory discrimination. Instead there is an informal, generalised approach to language skills and an encouragement of their gradual development as a means of communication: first by speaking and listening, and later by the introduction of small items of reading and writing.

During the first few terms, teachers read stories to children and "share" attractive well-illustrated books with small groups of them. Then, as children pick up books from the book corner and examine all the surrounding display tables, pictures and models, their interest in printed and written words is fostered. Many of the pictures and activities have clearly-printed notices attached. The children soon learn to read these, in order to find out such information as the names of the objects on the

nature table, who has made the intriguing model or when they themselves may paint, serve in the shop or play in the Wendy house. During this early stage, the child probably learns to read and write his own name, perhaps by first putting it on a picture he has painted. Later he will want to write something underneath his picture, e.g. "This is my mummy". His teacher will help him to write this and read what he has written. This stage is generally followed by the child wanting to write small "stories", which at first may only be a sentence or two. Such procedures are broadly language-experience based.

When the child has a small vocabulary of sight words and the teacher considers him sufficiently interested to begin more formal work, a reading scheme, based on a Look-and-Say method, will probably be introduced. The names of the characters and the early words in the first book will probably be learned through flash-card practice and games, in a small group situation. Later, a single child or a few would, with the teachers' help, examine the first page or two of the book, and so learn to read it.

Once a child has begun a reading scheme, an infant teacher's main means of forwarding his progress is to "hear" him read and to prompt him when he fails to recognise a word. As the children in any class are at widely scattered stages in the reading scheme, listening to children reading aloud is done individually or in very small groups. Although teachers do not look upon errors in oral reading as diagnostic cues, yet they regard this practice as the backbone of their reading instruction. The Bullock Committee found that over half the teachers of 6 year olds heard all the children in their classes read to them at least 3 or 4 times a week; the poorer readers receiving more of this help than the better readers. The teacher generally records the pages each child has read to her on a card kept in his book. This is the main, and sometimes the only, means of record-keeping in most schools.

Although neither teachers nor pupils in England are acquainted with the two vowels who go walking, nevertheless teachers quite often do a small amount of incidental phonic training with those children who have made a good start with a reading scheme. This has generally been analytic phonic work based on words from the children's sight vocabulary. Until the past year or so, however, such work was limited in amount and conception. The 97% of infant teachers, who reported to the Bullock Committee that they did some phonic work in one particular week in 1973, could easily lead people unfamiliar with English infant classes to seriously overestimate the quite small amount of phonic training which had actually been occurring.

While the teacher is giving attention to individual children or groups of children, the remainder of the class are likely to be engaged in personal reading, writing, drawing or other miscellaneous activities. Consequently the teacher frequently finds herself distracted from listening to a child who is reading aloud to her, by other children who need encouraging to settle down or who come to ask for help with spellings.

C Incidental Reading and Writing

In most infant classes, in addition to some work with a basic reading scheme, a great deal of incidental reading and writing goes on. In every classroom, and frequently in corridors and entrance halls, fiction, poetry and information books are displayed. Children browse among these books, share them with friends or examine and read them quietly on their own. In most schools children are allowed to borrow books to take home. The movement towards "progressive" education has also resulted in an enormous surge of written expression from even quite young children. They write original "stories" for themselves, as well as poetry. They record the interesting events of their days and they engage in miniature "research" among non-fiction books about "projects" on which they are currently

working. They then write and illustrate small "books" on castles or dinasaurs etc. All this child-initiated reading and writing is continually enriching their experience of the written and printed word.

D How Important Is The Infant Reading Scheme?

Despite all the other reading and writing going on in their classes, most infant teachers regard a basic reading scheme as the core of their reading teaching, and the selection of the "best" scheme as vital. The writer, however, has long thought that this rich background of reading and writing was probably responsible for more of young children's reading progress than the work done by teachers in connection with reading schemes. In 1968 she suggested that:

> "..... the words found in the early stages of a basic reading scheme may represent only a small proportion of the actual printed and written vocabulary with which the child is in contact during his time in school".(10)

A small experiment, designed to find out the proportions of time spent on these two different kinds of reading and writing activities was undertaken at Manchester University and published under the title of "How Important Is The Infant Reading Scheme" (11). Eight classes of 5 and 6 year olds in six city schools were selected for the experiment. Each teacher was convinced that her reading teaching was based on her chosen reading scheme. An observation schedule was devised, whereby the observer could, for periods of 30 minutes, record at 10 second intervals, every reading and writing activity in which a child was engaged. The activities were categorised according to whether or not they were related to the reading scheme. The results fully confirmed the hypothesis that more time was spent on incidental reading and writing than on the reading scheme. The results showed only slight variations in respect of such variables as age, sex, class, school or reading scheme.

The simplest way of expressing the results is in terms of a hypothetical hour which the teacher considered to be devoted to reading and writing activities. In such an hour, individual children age 5 and 6, of average intelligence and verbal ability, spent their time, on average, as follows:

On activities relating to the reading scheme:	4 mins (7%)
On other reading and writing activities:	29 mins (48%)
On extraneous or diversionary activities:	27 mins (45%)

Lest you are startled by the proportion of apparently "wasted" time, the children in all eight classes made average or above average reading progress in the year.

IV DEVELOPMENTS IN READING PHILOSOPHIES AND PRACTICES

The current pattern of teaching beginning reading in England can best be appreciated in the light of developments over the past 25 years or so.

A Establishment of Look-and-Say Methods

On the pre-war years, infant teachers had regarded the teaching of reading as one of their main tasks and phonics as the accepted method of doing so. The period from 1945 onwards, and throughout the 1950's, saw the growth of "Look-and-Say" sentence or word methods. Young teachers, fresh from college were the chief advocates of such methods, which were frequently looked upon by older teachers as "new-fangled nonsense". Nevertheless, new reading schemes published during the 1950's were based on "Look-and-Say" methods. Their general standard of production and quantity of coloured illustrations made them more attractive than the older phonic readers. Schools began to buy and use them - and some are still using them 20-25 years later, e.g. (3),(4),(5) and (6). Unfortunately, during this time, many teachers grew to accept that the use of "Look-and-Say" methods precluded the need for any phonic teaching.

B Growth of "Progressive" Practices

During the 1950's England also experienced the earliest beginnings of "progressive", "informal" or "open" infant schools. The movement increased during the 1960's and the final seal of approval was put on it by the Plowden Report (12) in 1967. Although only a minority of infant schools (perhaps about 15-20%) have ever been run on truly "progressive" lines, the movement nevertheless affected reading in a number of ways. First, there was the implied suggestion that learning to read was less important than other activities, such as "creative activities". The 500 page Plowden Report, for instance, which covered all aspects of primary education, devoted only five pages specifically to reading and, of these, only one page related to "Teaching Children To Read". The assumption began to be accepted that if children were "surrounded by beautiful books" - a phrase frequently used - and were free to handle them, they would all eventually be eager to learn to read. This emphasis on motivation seemed to imply that motivation would automatically be followed by learning. The teacher was to become a guide and councillor rather than an instructor. In fact, the word "teaching" became almost a dirty word. It reached the stage when teachers felt called upon to apologise to visitors who might actually find them doing a little direct teaching with a small group of children. Lecturers, also, unless they wished to be regarded as old-fashioned, thought it advisable to change their lecture titles from "The Teaching of Reading" to "Children Learning To Read".

C Doubts About Progressive Movement

Not every-one, however, was entirely happy about the effect these progressive regimes were having on reading and other basic subjects. Teachers in junior schools complained about the lack of reading skills in pupils promoted from infant schools and remedial reading teachers found their loads increasing. A few reading experts began to suggest that, if all children

were to become successful readers, perhaps more was needed than just motivation and general encouragement.

I. A Personal Viewpoint

The writer, for example, in 1969, in a paper entitled "The Importance Of Structure in Beginning Reading" (13) was saying:

> "When the emphasis is on learning, the main danger is that the teacher will assume that in a stimulating environment, with freedom to explore and experiment, all children will eventually want to learn to read, and will be able to do so without specific instruction." and
>
> "..... in infant classes ..... the freer the atmosphere and the more informal the working procedures, the more imperative it becomes that the reading environment should be so structured, as not only to encourage reading, but also to forward its progress."

At that time, some people considered these views to be reactionary. In fact, the writer was searching for a balanced programme which would consist of highly motivated learning situations, supported by carefully planned and knowledgeable structures of guidance, reinforcement and teaching in the whole field of reading.

In 1971 a research report (14) was published which lent support to the writer's conclusions. Reporting on twelve infant schools in deprived areas, the authors found that " ..... initial reading success does not prove to be associated with what are sometimes loosely considered to be 'progressive" methods ....." They concluded that the major difference between schools successful and unsuccessful in teaching reading was "the lack of systematic instruction in the unsuccessful schools", in which they noted a considerable neglect of phonics, few set periods of reading instruction and a delay in beginning to teach reading until children manifested spontaneous interest

in it. In contrast in the successful schools, reading instruction tended to be organised and recognizable from the start, and early phonic instruction was common. The one exception to this general trend was the most successful school of all, in which activity methods and creativity were combined with a certain amount of teacher-direction. This last regime is exactly the one which the writer would support.

2. The Black Papers

Meanwhile, a much more definite reaction against "progressive educational methods" had been fermenting in the minds of non-reading-specialists - employers, educational journalists and others. It erupted in a series of Black Papers - an emotive title if ever there was one! The first two were published in 1969((15) and (16))and the fifth appeared in 1977. The writers attributed falling standards in reading, writing and spelling to "progressive" methods, lack of formal teaching and lack of discipline. Firm research evidence was noticeably missing from many of these papers, which relied mostly on anecdotal accounts of reading standards in the authors' younger days. The authors' solutions tended to lie in an advocacy of the theme of returning to the "good old days" of formal teaching. A great deal of the national press supported the views of the Black Papers. One educational journalist, however, noted that:

> "The Black Paper writers seem peculiarly detached from 1975. They belong in a mythical golden age when academic standards were high and all children could read."

However, even apart from the Black Paper writers, general concern about reading standards was increasing. It was intensified in 1972 by the publication of the results of the latest national reading survey, The Trend of Reading Standards (17) giving undertaken by the Department of Education and Science. In contrast to previous surveys undertaken between 1948 and 1964, which had established a trend of successively higher reading standards for 11 and 15 year olds,

this latest survey suggested that average test scores were levelling out or falling behind.

3. The Bullock Committee

The shock of this report provoked questions in the House of Commons, which resulted in the setting up of a Government Committee of Inquiry into Reading and the Use of English. This committee, chaired by Sir Alan Bullock was the first government committee ever to have been concerned with Reading. Its report, A Language For Life (1), commonly referred to as the Bullock Report, was published in 1975.

Regarding the formal/progressive controversy, the Bullock Report took a balanced view about mid-way between the progressives and the formal traditionalists. It viewed the teaching of reading against the broadest possible background of language development in all areas of the curriculum. While lending support to many of the "progressive" aspects of primary education, it also emphasised the need for some specific teaching in the fields of reading and written expression. For instance, it stated:

> "It is unrealistic to expect every child to be a competent reader on leaving the infant school. But the foundation of reading should be firmly laid there and not left until the child reaches the junior school."

It also indicated that both phonics and spelling should be taught.

The publication of the Bullock Report is bound, in the long run, to have an effect on beginning reading in England. The idea of the importance of some structure in the teaching of reading is becoming accepted. Teachers who received little initial training in teaching reading are now anxious to increase their expertise. Enrolments for courses of in-service training and for the Open University's course in Reading Development are increasing. Thus the number of teachers knowledgeable in the field of reading is growing considerably.

4. Education - The Great Debate

Meanwhile, in 1977, public concern about standards of literacy and numeracy is becoming vociferous. Employers and parents, as well as educationists, are expressing themselves with great firmness, and banner headlines in the press about falling standards are almost daily occurrences. The furore has been partly sparked off by our grave economic problems: the public want to see results for all the money being spent on Education. The Prime Minister has agreed that the question of "Standards" will be looked into. National surveys and enquiries are being organised and the Secretary of State for Education is currently holding a series of regional meetings entitled "Education - The Great Debate". There is a great deal of talk about the establishment of a core "curriculum" and about more effective methods of monitoring progress. The results are clearly going to be that industrialists and parents will demand higher standards in reading and written work, and will expect much more say in what is done in schools.

V LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Current concerns with educational standards and practices, which are as strongly declared as those outlined, cannot fail to influence future educational practices, including beginning reading. The writer suspects that the following changes may well occur:

1. Infant teachers will give higher priority to the teaching of reading;
2. Teachers are likely to incorporate more formal teaching into their "progressive" or "open" regimes;
3. The teaching of phonics will become part of a planned reading programme;
4. There will be more assessment, diagnosis and record-keeping than has been usual in infant classes;
5. There will be a greater emphasis on encouraging children to be task-orientated.
6. Children will be expected to put a greater effort into learning to read;

7. Parents will expect to have some say in what and how their children are taught and some will want to help with reading in schools - as a few already do now.

The writer hopes that changes will be forward looking rather than representing a nostalgic return to older methods. She would like to see changes directed towards the achievement of a balance between children who are strongly motivated to learn to read, supported by teachers who are not only eager to encourage them but also prepared to engage in specific and knowledgeable teaching at appropriate points.

The questions one would then be asking would not be whether reading standards were rising or falling, but whether each child was progressing at his optimum rate - a much more difficult but more worthwhile question. The writer's belief is that highly motivated and knowledgeable teachers of reading could so inspire and support children in their learning, as to ensure that all children would learn to read faster, and progress further than teachers have ever previously imagined possible.

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